



Upper Spencer Gulf Social Services Planning – A Gender Lens

Background

Planning is underway for major new industrial development opportunities in the Upper Spencer Gulf utilising the available critical minerals, renewable energy and potential hydrogen power to facilitate the development of downstream processing and other industry. According to Planning SA, this could see between \$20b and \$70b in capital investment in the region, creating up to 20,000 jobs in the construction phase and around 3,000 additional long-term jobs with a population increase of up to 69,000 by 2036.

This is a once in a generation chance to get development right – making sure that no one is harmed or left behind and to make the development work for everyone. But this will require social impact assessment and planning beyond the industrial and land-use planning currently being done, and it requires a gender lens on this planning.

The Gender Challenge

While the development potential is huge, we need to recognise that the development is driven by male-dominated industries. With current workforce structures, the overwhelming workforce benefits will accrue to men. This has statewide implications because the SA gender wage gap is around half the national average – in part, driven by a relative absence of well-paid jobs at the top-end of the labour market. The inflow of male workers (predominantly) into what will be high-paying construction and manufacturing jobs threatens to increase the state's gender wage gap (as it has done in Western Australia).

The first challenge then is to ensure that women have pathways into the jobs created by the new development. This is about more than workforce skills and training, or strategies to attract and retain female staff in non-traditional industries. These are important, but there is also a need to remove barriers to women's participation in that workforce. Given women are still the predominant carers in society, central to this will be ensuring that there is sufficient age, disability and child care services in the Upper Spencer Gulf to enable women's workforce participation.

There is a further challenge in providing these services in the region because much care work is poorly paid, so it will be hard to attract and retain a workforce if there are unskilled jobs paying more in the mining and industrial sectors.

Beyond the issue of women in the workforce, there are a range of social impacts from the planned development that will also have gendered outcomes. For instance, the arrival of a new well-paid workforce will inevitably increase pressure on the housing market – pushing up prices and rents and leaving low-income households in precarious positions. Given that

on average women earn less than men, and women are massively over-represented among single parents on low incomes, these housing pressures will have gendered impacts.

Competition for scarce housing will also impact directly on housing support and other services. Some crisis support service providers are already reporting difficulties as workers take up hotel and temporary accommodation that services would normally use to temporarily house people in crisis.

The demand and inflation issues brought by the arrival of a new, well-paid workforce is not limited to housing as other living costs may also increase – impacting on existing community members on low incomes. Again, this will impact disproportionately on women.

Finally, there are a range of overt gender impacts of narrow industrial development around issues of social isolation for a workforce with few roots in the local areas, drug and alcohol usage, gambling and domestic and family violence.

None of these issues are new or surprising – they have been experienced to a greater or lesser degree in most areas where significant new development is driven by male-dominated industries like mining and manufacturing. But put bluntly, failure to plan for these issues is a threat both to gender equality and to the industrial development plan itself.

Planning Gaps

Planning in SA is subject to the *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016*, the State Planning Policies (2019) and regional plans prepared by the State Planning Commission. This legislative and policy framework does not include analysis of social impact, planning for health and community service supports, or a gender lens on the planning issues.

In SACOSS' [Submission to the 2024-25 State Budget](#) process, we argued that planning is needed to consider a broad array of social impacts arising from the development in the Upper Spencer Gulf and to provide for human services and social infrastructure, including in relation to:

- The local economic impacts of booms and busts in the construction phases of the development plans;
- The impact of increased population on:
 - Demand for childcare, schools and the qualified staff in those professions
 - Demand for health services including GPs, community health services (including mental health supports) and hospital infrastructure;
 - Demand for other community services such as disability supports, homelessness services, gambling help and family supports;
- The impact of increased demand and inflationary pressures on current residents on low and fixed incomes, and the support services for those residents;
- Additional social services demand likely to arise from an influx of people with limited connection to the area and fewer support networks.

Putting a gender lens on the development of the Upper Spencer Gulf adds weight to this call for social impact and social service planning, but it also adds new content and frames to the issues that need to be included in such planning.